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## **Japan's Maritime Security Policies:**

FOIP, Quad, East China Sea, and  
South China Sea

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## Introduction

As a resource-poor trading country surrounded by seas and characterized by a long coastline and numerous islands, maritime security is an issue of critical importance for Japan in maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as in securing its maritime transportation routes. Postwar Japan returned to the international community following the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty as a nation with virtually no military capabilities. For this reason, it had no choice but to rely on the United States for its maritime security. Beginning in the 1970s, Japan responded to the continued buildup of the Soviet Far Eastern Fleet in Vladivostok by endeavoring to acquire capabilities for blockading the Tsushima Strait, the Tsugaru Strait, and the Soya Strait. The ability to control these key choke points was considered vital to restraining the activities of the Soviet fleet stationed in Vladivostok. At the same time, under the aegis of the doctrine of “defending sea lanes up to 1,000 nautical miles,” Japan acted to enhance its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities in the waters surrounding the Nansei and Ogasawara Islands in a move designed to ensure the arrival of US reinforcements. Japan’s commitment to controlling the three straits and the enhancement of its ISR capabilities around the Japanese archipelago succeeded in effectively containing the Soviet fleet within the Sea of Japan.

With the end of the Cold War, China’s maritime expansion came to replace the Soviet Union as the primary source of Japan’s maritime security concerns. During the 1980s, China established a near-sea defense strategy covering the areas of its first and second island-chains. Beginning around 2008, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy) extended the scope of its activities up to the first island-chain. By 2020, the scope of PLA Navy activity had crossed the second island-chain and routinely extended into the Western Pacific. In the East China Sea, the PLA Navy has been conducting military drills and exercises and information gathering. In the South China Sea, China has reclaimed and militarized large-scale artificial islands. The PLA Navy has also been dispatching submarines and other naval vessels to the Indian Ocean for conducting anti-piracy activities. These initiatives are believed to be aimed at forestalling US military intervention in the event of a contingency in addition to maintaining China’s sea lanes. Combined with the reinforcement of China’s missile capabilities, these maritime activities have greatly changed the region’s military balance. China has also used government vessels and fishing boats to constantly and unilaterally change the status quo in the waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands and the Spratly Islands in contravention of international law, creating a “grey zone” situation that cannot be defined as either “peacetime”

or “contingency.” Furthermore, since 2016, China has been increasing its pressure on Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party administration and expanding its military activities in areas surrounding Taiwan. It is increasingly feared that Japan will be pulled into the conflict in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

China’s naval and maritime expansion has become a major issue in securing Japan’s territorial defenses and sea lines of communication. Furthermore, China’s assertion of its own maritime interests has come to present a serious challenge to maritime legal order, in response to which the Japanese government has adopted various policies and actions. First, Japan has been upgrading its defenses along the first island-chain. Second, Japan has pursued various initiatives for maintaining maritime legal order, which includes initiatives for promoting a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)” and pursuing strategic dialogue in the Quad (Japan, US, Australia, India) framework. The remainder of this article provides an overview of Japan’s maritime security policies centered on island-chain defenses and maintaining maritime legal order, and reviews current conditions and future challenges.

### **Maritime security initiatives under the Abe administration**

Since 2008, China has been dispatching maritime law enforcement vessels to

the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands and has expanded the scope of the activities of its naval vessels and military aircraft from the East China Sea to include the waters of the Pacific. The Japanese government responded to these developments by revising its National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG) in 2010, and shifting the concentration of its defensive stance from a northern to southwestern focus. Along the same lines, Japan strengthened its ISR capabilities around the Nansei Islands by adopting a “dynamic defense force” strategy. The NDPG was further revised in 2013 under the second administration of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and committed the nation to strengthening the defenses of the Nansei Islands by building a “dynamic joint defense force.” Under this strategy, while maintaining maritime and air superiority, Japan began to emphasize the ability to deploy ground forces from the Japanese mainland to the Nansei Islands. Various measures were taken to support the new strategy, including reinforcement of fighter and early warning aircraft at Naha in Okinawa, introduction of standoff missiles, increase of the number of submarines, creation of new amphibious and rapid deployment forces tasked with defending remote islands, and deployment of early warning units, surface-to-ship and surface-to-air guided missile forces in the Nansei Islands. As an additional measure, the posture of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) was strengthened, and a special Senkaku Unit was created and stationed on Ishigaki Island.

China has been steadily upgrading and enhancing its comprehensive capabilities around the Nansei Islands. In response to these developments, Japan once again revised its NDPG in 2018. While retaining the concept of a “dynamic joint defense force,” the 2018 Guidelines committed to building a “multi-domain defense force” that combines cross-domain capabilities in such new domains as space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic spectrum with the traditional domains of land, sea, and air. This strategy is designed to cope with situations in which Japan finds it difficult to maintain maritime and air superiority. Faced with such circumstances, the objective is to be able to organically fuse capabilities across all domains to generate synergy in operations so that inferiority in individual domains can be overcome. To achieve this strategy, the NDPG includes initiatives for such actions as an increase in the number of fighter aircraft and enhancement of their capabilities, creation of new hyper velocity gliding projectile units intended for the defense of remote islands, deployment of long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles for strengthening ISR capabilities on Japan’s Pacific flank, deployment of short takeoff and vertical landing aircraft (STOVL) on Izumo-class destroyers, development of integrated air and missile defense systems, creation of a new dedicated space operations force, creation of a new cyber defense force, and creation of a new electronic warfare force. Parallel to this, the JCG has continued to enhance

its capabilities and to strengthen its cooperation with the Maritime Self-Defense Force.

Meanwhile, Japan has also worked to strengthen its cooperation with the United States. The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation revised in 2015 expands the range of peacetime Japan-US cooperation and contains provisions for cooperation in information gathering, surveillance and reconnaissance, maritime security, training and exercises, and air and missile defense. These Guidelines also provide for new programs for cooperation in the defense of remote islands and cross-domain operations (including cyber and space) in the event of an armed attack on Japan (Japan contingency). In the defense of islands, it was determined that the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) would be primarily responsible for preventing and repelling invasions and retaking islands, while the United States Armed Forces would conduct operations in support of these operations. Furthermore, various mechanisms were established to ensure the effectiveness of alliance coordination. These consist of an Alliance Coordination Mechanism for strengthening policy and operational coordination, and a Bilateral Planning Mechanism.

The South China Sea and the Indian Ocean contain maritime transportation routes that are of vital importance to Japan. In these regions, Japan has undertaken to support capacity-building

in coastal countries, and the SDF has begun to conduct presence operations. In November 2016, then-Defense Minister Tomomi Inada announced the Vientiane Vision for Japan-ASEAN defense cooperation. The Vientiane Vision calls for the preservation of the rule of law, strengthening maritime security, and building ASEAN capacity in multiple fields. Various initiatives have been launched under this framework. For instance, in 2016, Japan provided 10 patrol boats and two large patrol vessels to the Philippines. In 2020, Japan provided the Philippines with air surveillance radar systems that will enable the Philippines to monitor the movements of the PLA in the Bashi Channel with the expectation that the information would be shared with Japan. Furthermore, the Maritime Self-Defense Force has been dispatching naval vessels, including helicopter destroyers, to the South China Sea and Indian Ocean every year since 2017 to conduct training and friendly calls to countries in the region (the Indo-Pacific Deployment).

Responding to the challenges posed to maritime legal order in the Indo-Pacific region, the Japanese government's National Security Strategy (NSS) formulated in December 2013 calls for maintaining the principle of "Open and Stable Seas" based on international law and rules. To realize this objective, then-Prime Minister Abe advocated the "Three Principles of the Rule of Law at Sea" at the Shangri-La Dialogue of May 2014. The

three principles call on nations to make and clarify claims based on international law, not use force or coercion to drive claims, and settle disputes by peaceful means. In August 2016, Abe presented the concept of FOIP and promoted the rule of law, connectivity, and maritime security. In September 2019, the Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held for the first time to discuss cooperation in promoting FOIP. At this time, the four countries reaffirmed their shared commitment to close cooperation in the areas of maritime security, quality infrastructure and connectivity. In subsequent years, ASEAN and such European countries as the United Kingdom and France expressed their support for FOIP. These developments indicate a growing and shared awareness of the importance of maintaining a rule-based international maritime order.

As outlined above, the principal measures taken under the Abe administration in response to China's maritime expansion consisted of tasking the SDF with strengthening the defenses of the Nansei Islands, and working through FOIP to extend international cooperation for maintaining maritime legal order. These policies were continued under the administrations of Yoshihide Suga and Fumio Kishida that followed, and became established as Japan's basic position on maritime security.

## Initiatives and challenges under the Suga and Kishida administrations

Then-Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and President Joe Biden met in Washington DC on April 16, 2021. In the joint statement released after the summit meeting, the importance of the security of the Taiwan Strait was emphasized for the first time since 1969, or in 52 years. Following the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party as president of Taiwan in 2022, Chinese military aircraft had begun to repeatedly cross the median line of the Taiwan Strait to enter Taiwan's air defense identification zone, raising concerns for the possibility of unexpected incidents and accidents. Against this background, the leaders of Japan and the United States reaffirmed the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and urged a peaceful resolution of the cross-strait issue. On his part, then-Prime Minister Suga expressed Japan's determination to strengthen its defensive capabilities. The two sides also agreed to begin consultations on joint responses in the event of a Taiwan contingency. Subsequently, Japan affirmed the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait with Australia, the EU and other like-minded countries.

When former US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022, China responded by conducting large-scale military exercises in areas surrounding Taiwan. China set up a total

of six exercise zones around Taiwan that simulated a blockade of Taiwan, and five ballistic missiles were fired into Japan's exclusive economic zones, forcing local fishermen to suspend their operations. During this period, commercial vessels were forced to circumvent the exercise zones, while some airlines were left with no choice but to cancel their flights. These developments made it clear that in the event of an actual naval blockade of Taiwan, the global supply chain would be exposed to high levels of risk. For Japan, a Taiwan contingency may not only lead to attacks on Japanese territory, but could also massively disrupt trade and fishing activities. Following these exercises, the PLA has been routinely crossing the median line in the Taiwan Strait, raising concerns that it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between a military exercise and an actual invasion.

In December 2022, the administration of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida revised Japan's NSS. Citing China's attempts to unilaterally change the status quo in the Senkaku Islands and the Spratly Islands and calling attention to growing Chinese pressure against Taiwan, the document identified China as posing the "greatest strategic challenge" to Japan's security and the international order, and expressed concern that China has been strengthening of its strategic ties with Russia, which has invaded Ukraine. Both this NSS and the National Defense Strategy call for responses based on enhancing Japan's comprehensive

national power and promoting cooperation with allies and like-minded nations. The two documents indicate that in order to realize these strategies, Japan will have to double its defense budget to reach a level of 2% of GDP. The additional budgetary outlays will allow Japan to defend against new ways of warfare enumerated in the National Defense Strategy, which include missile attacks, hybrid warfare, asymmetric attacks, and the threat of using nuclear weapons. Japan will defend itself by strengthening "counterstrike capabilities" that leverage stand-off defense capabilities, by deploying integrated air and missile defense capabilities, by reinforcing unmanned asset defense capabilities, and by upgrading the sustainability and resiliency (war sustainability) of these systems.

Regarding "counterstrike capabilities," given the qualitative and quantitative enhancement of Chinese and North Korean missile capabilities, it will be difficult to respond only by strengthening Japan's missile defense capabilities. For this reason, "counterstrike capabilities" are intended to thwart a second or subsequent strike from an adversary. That is to say, "counterstrike capabilities" are positioned as part of denial deterrence to neutralize the adversary's attack. It is believed that Japan's principal counterattack targets will be such fixed targets as air and naval bases and some moving vessels, and will be aimed at preventing the adversary from gaining air and sea superiority.

The above strategies are believed to be geared toward a Taiwan contingency, in the event of which Japan will help maintain the operational foundations of US military forces by focusing on the defense of the Nansei Islands and will also provide logistical support. Through these means, Japan will endeavor to prevent landing operations on Japanese territory and secure sea lines of communication. It appears that the formulation of Japan-US joint operation plans for a Taiwan contingency is approaching its final stages. However, it remains unclear whether Japanese public opinion will support Japan's participation in the defense of Taiwan. As it is fully conceivable that China will engage in information warfare to affect public opinion in order to estrange Japan from the United States, there is an urgent need to devise countermeasures.

Among the initiatives taken by the Suga and Kishida administrations for maintaining international maritime order is the elevation of the Quad to the level of heads of government. A video summit meeting was held in March 2021, and face-to-face summit meetings have been held beginning in September 2021. These summit meetings have allowed the leaders of the four Quad countries to reaffirm their cooperation for realizing FOIP and to share their concerns regarding the situation in the East China Sea and South China Sea. In the summit meeting held in May 2022, Quad leaders announced the establishment of the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime

Domain Awareness (IPMDA) aimed at information-sharing for promoting maritime domain awareness in the region. It is hoped that IPMDA will bolster support for ASEAN and Pacific Island nations, enabling them to participate in monitoring illegal fishing activities, mainly carried out by Chinese fishing vessels, and to contribute to the protection of marine and environmental resources. The Quad is now going beyond its initial mandate for maintaining maritime security and promoting cooperation in the areas of infrastructure and connectivity, and is venturing into such new areas of concern as climate change, emerging technologies, cybersecurity, and enhancing supply-chain resilience. As such, the Quad is emerging as a public-goods provider for the region. Furthermore, in 2020, Australia joined the Malabar naval exercises conducted by Japan, the United States and India, in effect transforming these exercises into a de facto joint Quad naval exercise. Since its inception, there have been persistent calls and strong expectations for the Quad to engage in military cooperation. This brings into question whether the Quad will be able to continue functioning as a regional purveyor of public goods.

The Kishida administration has launched into strengthening Japan's security cooperation with the Philippines and South Korea. With regard to the Philippines, Japan has been considering entering into a visiting forces agreement. Japan has also conducted joint trilateral exercises

involving the coast guards of Japan, the United States and the Philippines, and has engaged in trilateral consultations between the national security advisors of the three countries. These initiatives are thought to be aimed at strengthening relations with the Philippines with the possibility of a Taiwan contingency in mind. However, because the Philippines must also pay close attention to its relations with China, it is difficult to predict what substantive advances can be made in creating cooperative arrangements. With regard to relations with South Korea that have long been weighed down by problems of historical perception and interpretation, it is notable that the administration of President Yoon Suk Yeol has adopted a realistic approach to national security policies. Against this backdrop, Japan, the United States, and South Korea have restarted their cooperation in anti-submarine drills and missile defenses, and are eyeing to expand their cooperation into the area of Indo-Pacific security. While South Korea's primary concern is the threat from North Korea, it is expected that advances can be made with the Yoon administration in securing maritime transportation routes and supporting capacity-building in coastal countries.

Regarding capacity-building support for coastal countries, a system for Official Security Assistance (OSA) has been created under Japan's new NSS, allowing the provision of direct assistance to the armed forces of foreign countries. While under the existing framework for

Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA), assistance is limited to the law enforcement agencies of foreign countries, OSA will now allow Japan to assist in enhancing the deterrence capabilities of like-minded countries. Moreover, the government is currently considering revising laws to enable Japan to provide lethal weapons to foreign countries. It can be expected that if enacted, such revisions will permit Japan to provide higher-capacity weapons to foreign countries through OSA.

### Conclusion

Given its geopolitical circumstances, Japan has a vital need to pursue maritime security in order to maintain its territorial security and its sea lines of communication. During the Cold War, Japan predicated its security on its alliance with the United States with its overwhelming naval power, and in order to ensure the reinforcement of US military forces, Japan developed necessary capabilities for anti-submarine warfare, anti-mine warfare and fleet air defense during this period. However, due to the maritime expansion of China and the relative decline in US naval power, Japan is now being forced to allocate its resources to territorial defense rather than to the security of its sea lines of communication. The conversion of destroyers developed for anti-submarine warfare to aircraft carriers tasked with carrying out air defense missions bears eloquent testimony to this shift. Consequently, Japan is finding it

necessary to alter its defense posture and operational doctrine from securing its maritime transportation routes to defending its territory. However, the importance of securing sea lines of communication is also increasing, and Japan is responding to this need by supporting capacity-building in coastal countries, and working to maintain the maritime order by reinforcing international cooperation through FOIP. On the other hand, China shows no signs of hesitating in its pursuit of changing the status quo, and is adopting an increasingly aggressive stance. This makes it necessary for Japan not only to pursue peacetime international cooperation, but to more actively participate in international cooperation frameworks that are designed to cope with contingencies that arise when deterrence has failed.

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